



Kosick, R. (2017). On the Matter of the Concept: Neoconcretism's Relational Poetics. *Luso-Brazilian Review*, 54(2), 108-128.
<https://doi.org/10.3368/lbr.54.2.108>

Early version, also known as pre-print

Link to published version (if available):
[10.3368/lbr.54.2.108](https://doi.org/10.3368/lbr.54.2.108)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the submitted manuscript manuscript (pre-print). The final published version (version of record) is available online via University of Wisconsin Press at DOI: 10.3368/lbr.54.2.108. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

On the Matter of the Concept: Ferreira Gullar's Relational Poetics

Rebecca Kosick rebecca.kosick@bristol.ac.uk

Rebecca Kosick is a Lecturer in Translation Studies in the Department of Hispanic, Portuguese, and Latin American Studies at the University of Bristol, UK. Her research focuses on 20th century and contemporary poetry and art in hemispheric America with publications that include “Assembling *La nueva novela*: Juan Luis Martínez and a Material Poetics of Relation” (*Latin American Research Review*). She is currently working on a book manuscript entitled *Word, Image, Object: On the Matter of Poetics in Hemispheric America*.

This article explores how neoconcrete poetry is created in language's relational capacities. Though neoconcretism's relational practices have primarily been thought of as the domain the visual arts, my project uncovers a relational poetics in which language is plastic and made to matter. Looking at examples including poet Ferreira Gullar's “Buried Poem”—an underground poem-room which the “reader” enters—this essay shows that the poem plays an important role in the history of what Lygia Clark has called the “relational object.” By considering Gullar's reading of Merleau-Ponty alongside his neoconcrete poetry, this article demonstrates not only that the relational poetic object can be “transparent to phenomenological understanding” (as Gullar puts it) but that language partakes of this process from its most intimate insides. Not just a conceptual score which would guide, from the outside, the co-creation of a relational object, language, in a relational poetics, is part of what makes the object matter.

Este artigo explora como a poesia neoconcreta é criada nas capacidades relacionais da linguagem. Apesar das práticas relacionais do neoconcretismo serem consideradas principalmente no domínio das artes visuais, meu projeto revela uma poética relacional onde a linguagem é plástica e material. Olhando exemplos como o “Poema enterrado”—um poema-quarto subterrâneo do poeta Ferreira Gullar em que o “leitor” entra—este ensaio mostra que o poema tem um papel importante na história do que Lygia Clark chamou “objeto-relacional.” Considerando a leitura que Gullar faz de Merleau-Ponty ao lado de sua poesia neoconcreta, este artigo demonstra que o objeto poético relacional pode ser “transparente ao conhecimento fenomenológico” (como diz Gullar), e também que a linguagem participa deste processo desde as suas entranhas mais íntimas. Numa poética relacional, a linguagem não é apenas uma partitura conceitual que guiaria de fora a co-criação de um objeto-relacional, mas antes é parte do que faz o objeto material.

Until his death at the close of 2016, Ferreira Gullar was Brazil's best-known living writer.

A poet, theorist, and critic, his final column in the *Folha de São Paulo* appeared one week after his death. Its headline there announced, with a mix of irony and loss, “Não custa nada imaginar que uma nova arte está para nascer.” (Gullar, “Não Custa Nada Imaginar Que Uma Nova Arte

Está Para Nascer”). The column, dictated to his granddaughter from the hospital just before his death, never defines what this “nova arte” will be, but Gullar’s ability to imagine novel art forms is what most marked his long and varied career. This remained true throughout his eight decades, during which time he experimented with a number of approaches to writing poetry and wrote critically about a variety of topics including politics and the history—and future—of art. He was widely known for his writing in the popular media, for his poetry (in particular the long “Poema Sujo,” written in exile in 1975), and for his role as co-founder of the neoconcrete movement that announced itself in 1959 with a manifesto he helped compose.

Already demonstrating the ability to imagine new kinds of art, the “Manifesto neoconcreto” helped establish Gullar as the primary theorist of an interdisciplinary group of plastic¹ artists and poets. They joined together with the intention of rejecting earlier modes of mathematical concretism² in favor of a participatory and what they deemed “intuitive” approach to the making of art (Castro et al.). This approach included a variety of media and methods that intersected with painting, sculpture, performance, and, among other things, poetry. Until recently, however, poetry’s contributions to neoconcretism have been largely overlooked in comparison with those of the plastic arts, and Gullar has similarly been remembered most for his role within the neoconcrete movement as an art theorist.

This unbalanced legacy is especially evident in neoconcretism’s reception outside of Brazil, which has taken shape in large part within the context of art history. The international fame of neoconcrete plastic artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica has helped to drive scholarship about the group, and Gullar’s writing on his colleagues’ work, which included much with an overtly art historicizing bent, has helped establish the poet as, foremost, an important theoretical resource for scholars. At the same time, scholarship on twentieth century Brazilian poetry has

likewise contributed to this trend of comparatively underemphasizing Gullar's contributions as a neoconcrete poet. Writing on Brazilian poetry after modernism, Charles Perrone remarks that, "from the point of view of poetry [neoconcretism] hardly existed" but goes on to say that the movement "was significant for the plastic arts, having involved such artists as Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica" (62).

As Perrone later points out, another contributing factor for Gullar's comparatively slight prominence as a neoconcrete poet has to do with the extreme brevity of his poetic engagement with the group, which Perrone dates from 1959-61 (62), although this could be even further pinned to the late fifties alone. Gullar's neoconcrete poetry—in which I would include the *livro-poemas*, *poemas espaciais*, and the "Poema enterrado"—was produced in the few years immediately preceding the publication of the "Manifesto neoconcreto" in 1959. Though proclaiming the launch of the movement, the manifesto built upon an already brewing set of shared practices and sensibilities among its signatories. In fact, the year of its publication marked the end of Gullar's experiments with neoconcrete poetics as he began to question his approach on the basis of aesthetic and political concerns. As a matter of aesthetics, his neoconcrete poetry often included only a single word per poem, something that quickly led Gullar to ask himself whether he might be "empobrecendo [suas] potencialidades de poeta" ("Experiência neoconcreta" 61). Politically, a building interest in committed poetry that coincided with the rise of the military dictatorship eventually led Gullar to, as Perrone describes, turn his back on neoconcrete poetry and "all vanguard pretensions whatsoever" (62). His much longer career as an engaged and lyrical poet has, as a result, overshadowed Gullar's brief tenure as a neoconcrete one.

Beyond these causes, Renato Rodrigues Da Silva comments that, even in Brazil, there is still “only an insufficient or distorted knowledge” of Gullar’s neoconcrete poetry. Da Silva attributes this to the “academic organization of the fields of literary studies and art history” which, as delimited, struggle with the highly interdisciplinary nature of the poems Gullar made during neoconcretism (257). This is beginning to change, in part thanks to critics like Da Silva who are working to shine additional light on Gullar’s neoconcrete poetry. As Da Silva has helpfully pointed out, additional attention to this aspect of Gullar’s poetic trajectory can also help reveal the ways in which his neoconcrete theoretical writings emerged from experiments with poetry, not just from observations of the plastic arts.

Building on Da Silva’s claim that poetry was crucial to the development of Gullar’s theories about neoconcrete practice (plastic and poetic), I want to argue here that neoconcrete poetics contributes to a particularly *relational* understanding of reading subject and poetic object.³ By examining neoconcrete theories of the object alongside Gullar’s neoconcrete poetry, my aim is to show that the poetic object participated fully, if distinctly, in the development of the theories of relationality that emerged in neoconcrete plastic arts. Furthermore, by examining the relational exchange that takes place in Gullar’s neoconcrete poetry, this essay intends to broaden the possibilities for understanding poetic objecthood and poetic subjectivity as they are constituted in an encounter between matter and sensation.

The Neo and the Concrete

In exploring this development, it is necessary to consider neoconcrete poetry with—or against, as Gullar might have it—the concretism that came before. Concretism (which also included plastic and poetic categories) took shape in the years immediately preceding

neoconcretism's formation. Before that, the concretists and neoconcretists had been less distinct, and showed their work together at the Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta that took place in 1956 and 57. There were differences between the São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro-based concretists from the beginning⁴ (with these groups known, mostly among the plastic artists, as grupo ruptura and grupo frente, respectively). But, many of the figures who went on to claim the 'neo' prefix began as Rio-based concretists, including Lygia Clark⁵ and, though not without tension, Gullar.

Although Gullar was associated with concrete poetry in his early years, the São Paulo-based poets, Décio Pignatari and brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, comprised the core group. Concrete poetry made use of what this group referred to as "verbivocovisual" materials, which included the meaning, sound, and look of language. Neoconcrete poetry brought additional materials to bear, including those that activated the tactile and spatial aspects of the poem. By incorporating these materials and the senses they engaged, neoconcrete poetry extended the experiential capacity of the poem.

(Fig. 1 "Noite," Ferreira Gullar, *Experiência neoconcreta* 20)

Like concrete poetry, Gullar's "Noite" (figure 1) demonstrates poetic strategies that approach those also associated with the plastic arts. In concrete poetry, these strategies include the visual arrangement of the words on the page as well as repeating visual and sonic motifs that take shape in the language itself. These motifs and their arrangement on the page encourage readers to look at the poem as much as listen to it or understand it. A similar claim might be made about neoconcrete poetry, as in "Noite," which contains just this single word. Its use of color marks the work as visual, and readers are encouraged to move the blue circle in the top right of the image onto and off of the base where "Noite" appears in the center of the dot. In this case, touch is as important as sight or sound to the work's apprehension and is potentially more important than an

interpretation of its meaning. This is rare for readers of more lyrically-inclined, or even early concrete poetry, where tactile engagement with poems typically extends no further than the usually inconsequential act of turning a book's pages.

This is also one reason why works of neoconcrete poetry might more readily be received by the plastic arts. There, works of art have long been spatial, and especially during neoconcretism, they began to invite the kind of haptic participation that Gullar's poem does. That said, it is important to reiterate that for Gullar, a work like "Noite" constitutes a poem. As such, it is left to scholars to understand how to read such poems and to determine what the consequences for such a reading are for our understanding of neoconcretism's poetic legacy. Fellow neoconcrete poet Theon Spanúdis writes in the preface to his "Poemas"⁶ that neoconcrete poetry "abriu todo um novo caminho de criação especial no campo da poesia que abandonou o verso e a sintaxe tradicional, e incluiu o espaço gráfico da página como elemento constitutivo da realização poética" (2). Eventually, even the space of the page would be superseded in favor of other material and spatial possibilities. So, while it is true that neoconcrete poetry broke radically from traditional verse, and further radicalized concrete poetry's engagement with the senses, it continued to situate itself within poetry. As such, its "novo caminho" marked its course *inside* the poetic field, not outside of it. As a result, it pushed against, but did not shatter, the newly flexible limits of what poetry, as "neoconcrete," could be and do.

While neoconcretism's reception has downplayed the role of poetry in comparison to plastic art, poetry did constitute a major portion of the movement as it unfolded and contributed to its reasons for emerging. Of the six signatories on the 1959 "Manifesto neoconcreto" three are poets—Reynaldo Jardim, Gullar, and Spanúdis. At the same time, poems and poetry contribute to works of plastic art produced by the group. This is the case with, for example, Lygia Pape's

“poemas visuais” or Oiticica’s “caixa-poemas,” among other works.⁷ Furthermore, poetry was a driving force in neoconcretism’s break with concretism. When the neoconcretists came together, it was with the intent to combat what they saw as the “perigosa exacerbação racionalista” (Castro et al. 4) at work in concretism. They located this rationalization in both concrete poetry and concrete plastic art, but for Gullar, serving as the group’s most vocal theorist, the concrete poets were the primary target of his critique. Their approach to poetry, and Gullar’s desire to push poetry in new directions, served as a point of departure for the broader project of neoconcretism as Gullar helped articulate it.

Gullar understood the concretists, and the concrete poets in particular, as conceiving of the work of art (poetic or plastic) as a “máquina” or “objeto.” As an alternative, Gullar would forward the notion of the work of art as a “quasi-corpus,” “um ser cuja realidade não se esgota nas relações exteriores de seus elementos” (Castro et al. 4). This perspective demonstrates a departure from concrete theories of the object. Rather than theorizing that objects (poetic or otherwise) are something separate from human subjects, Gullar collapses the distinctions between these poles with the words “ser” and “quasi-corpus.” The work of art, for the neoconcretists, is thus not an isolated object determined by the interaction of its elements alone. Rather, it, like the human participants it engages, is also corporeal—a “being” capable of relating to and even merging with the human subject.

This relational understanding of object and subject was informed by a set of theoretical interests shared among the neoconcretists. At the launch of the movement, Gullar and others were particularly influenced by French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work⁸ Gullar began to read just as he was breaking from concretism. Among other things, Merleau-Ponty offered Gullar an alternative to the “scientificist vision that sought to explain everything

mathematically” (*Gullar in Conversation* 69), a vision of art that Gullar saw as hurtful to concretism. In this approach, as Gullar saw it, “art lost its autonomy and its creative capacity, in order to become an echo of science” (*Gullar in Conversation* 43). As an alternative, Gullar argued that “phenomenology recovers intuitive thought, which is aesthetic thought” and it was this possibility that Gullar sought to explore in his neoconcrete poetry (*Gullar in Conversation* 43).

Though I am not certain that a “scientificist vision” is as representative of concrete poetry as Gullar would claim, the distinctions he draws here do point to additional differences in the way the two groups approach the object, and its autonomy. The concrete poets, for their part, insist that “o poema concreto é um objeto em e por si mesmo, não um intérprete de objetos exteriores e/ou sensações mais ou menos subjetivas.” (A. de Campos, de Campos, and Pignatari 154). In this way of thinking, the autonomy of the poem is carved out from a background where language is beholden to the objects or emotions it expresses, so that the poem can become one object among others. Though neoconcrete approaches to the object would also come to complicate the direct representation of “exterior objects,” this is not Gullar’s understanding of autonomy. For him, the concrete poem, if liberated from the dominance of representation, remains obliged to science, and to the scientific approach that Gullar sees the concrete work as necessarily emerging from. The neoconcrete work, on the other hand, is autonomous precisely by its binding to sense experience, which, though taking place in the body of the participant, emerges not from an imposed framework, but from the object and its materiality.

The Object and the Concept

Emphasizing the prominence of the material object in neoconcretism goes against the grain of much of the movement's reception in the international art world. There, neoconcretism is often taken to represent a Brazilian strain of a broader shift away from arts that prioritize the object, toward dematerialized practices that favor the concept. Comparing neoconcretism to conceptual art, Mari Carmen Ramírez writes in *Global Conceptualism* that neoconcretism offered "the body and the senses as material for conceptual proposition" and argues their use of "semantic participation paved the way for researching sensorial interaction as the basis for conceptual practices" (62). Ramírez comments on the importance of the body, the senses, and language for the neoconcrete project, but, her descriptions suggest that neoconcrete works of art ultimately make use of these materials in the service of conceptual ends. Read in this way, neoconcretism's agenda comes to be aligned with that of conceptual art, wherein "the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work" (LeWitt 12). For conceptual art, the concept retains its primacy whether or not the work is actually materialized. This is not the case with neoconcretism, which continues to insist on the importance of the material object despite sharing with conceptualism a use of embodied and linguistic practices.

In neoconcretism, language is common to both plastic and poetic works, but in each it does more than just facilitate what Ramírez calls a "conceptual proposition." Poetry, in particular, helps to bring this fact to the fore as the inclusion of objects other than the book or the page make the work of poetry into a strikingly material work. As the discussion to follow further addresses, in Gullar's neoconcrete poetry, language is materially embodied in the poem-object. It is not an invitation to discard the object in favor of its idea. Though neoconcretism was certainly informed by conceptual curiosities (such as those having to do with the relations between subject and object), neoconcrete practice does not decenter the object. On the contrary, the object is

fundamental and, in the neoconcrete work, it serves as the material impetus for those relations that take place between it and the participant's sensory experience.

That said, the precise status of the object *is* a tricky question for neoconcretism. For one, if it is bound, relationally, to the also-in-question subject position of the participant, then it becomes difficult to talk about the object at all. Like the question of the distinction between poetry and plastic art within the movement, the blurred boundaries of subject and object put the suggestion of isolating either onto uneasy footing. Similarly, if the relational object is not defined by the "exterior relations of its elements" as is insisted in the "Manifesto neoconcreto," then it would seem to be defined by an interiority that is wholly inaccessible (Castro et al. 4). Finally, if the neoconcrete work of art is conceived as a being, then it's possible the term "object" is itself problematic, a remnant of a way of thinking that neoconcretism works to break with.

Nevertheless, the term "object" *is* used by the neoconcretists, though in modified form. In neoconcrete theories and works alike, the object is accompanied by a subject. In writings on the topic, even the word "object" often appears accompanied by modifying language. Gullar, for example, famously described the "non-object" in his essay, "Teoria do não-objeto," that appeared shortly after the "Manifesto neoconcreto." There, Gullar writes,

A expressão *não-objeto* não pretende designar um objeto negativo ou qualquer coisa que seja o oposto dos objetos materiais com propriedades exatamente contrárias desses objetos. O não-objeto não é um antiobjeto mas um objeto especial em que se pretende realizada a síntese de experiências sensoriais e mentais: um corpo *transparente*⁹ ao conhecimento fenomenológico, integralmente perceptível, que se rende à percepção sem deixar resto. (Gullar, "Teoria do não-objeto" 1)

It may be tempting to read a rejection of the object in the term “non-object,” but as Gullar points out, this is not entirely the case. Rachel Price describes Gullar’s argument there as favoring “the abandonment of the obsession with objecthood per se” and suggests that the object and non-object are positioned at opposite ends of the spectrum (169). However, as Sérgio B. Martins has pointed out, this spectrum is not meant to separate the object from something that is entirely *not* an object. Rather, the spectrum has to do with a difference between the neoconcrete object and objects “in the sense of an ordinary thing” that might be put to use in everyday life. “The prefix” Martins writes, “was meant to detach the artwork from that kind of ordinariness” (79). While certainly not ordinary, non-objects *are* actual and material

In fact, the theory of the non-object was also formulated on the basis of Gullar’s observation of a real object of art created by Lygia Clark. This artwork has been lost to history, but, as Martins describes, its legacy can be traced to “a dinner at Lygia Clark’s in 1959 when she chose a new work to present to her guests.” As Martins goes on to note, “Gullar’s many later descriptions of this work are far from consistent but commonly portray a diagonal construction of interlocked painted wooden plaques, connected at the edges” (79). Material but not useful or ordinary, this object helped establish the theory of the non-object.

It’s possible to read this trajectory as one that uses a material object in the service of a conceptual outcome. However, the trajectory here is significantly altered by the fact that, as Da Silva describes, “what had initially begun as an interpretation of Clark’s experiment became an aesthetic requirement” (259). As opposed to conceptual art where “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art” (LeWitt 12), in the theory of the non-object, an object led to an idea that generated other such objects. Unlike in conceptualism, in neoconcretism, such objects have to be materially realized, and sensorially engaged, in order for the work to exist. Just the idea alone

cannot call into being what Gullar describes as “um corpo *transparente* ao conhecimento fenomenológico” (“Teoria do não-objeto” 1).

The non-object does not signify a conceptual or dematerialized other to the object. Instead, the non-object, via its very materiality, exceeds its material relations to function as a site where another kind of relation takes place—between the object and the subject’s sense experience. In this way, the external and internal are, like subject and object, bound together. The interiority that matters in the non-object is not something akin to the mysterious inner lives of things. Rather, it is an openness that enables the subject’s internal sense experience to penetrate the object. However, this does not mean that the object disappears beneath the conceptual weight of its experience. Rather, its matter *matters* and is what makes phenomenological understanding possible in the first place.

The Relational Object

Phenomenological understanding involves a relational exchange in which the material object engages the participating subject. While Gullar examines this exchange in the context of his theory of the non-object, neoconcrete theories of relationality can also be tied to the “objetos relacionais” that Lygia Clark produced during, and in the years following, neoconcretism. A strict definition of her relational object would limit its scope to include only those objects Clark would place on the bodies of participants during her therapeutic practice that began in the 1970s. However, I approach the relational object more broadly to include earlier works by Clark, as well as by her neoconcrete colleagues, including Gullar.

As relational, these objects push into the distance between an artwork and its viewer to initiate a sensorial event in which there is “nenhuma separação entre sujeito-objeto” (Clark

"Caminhando"). This lack of separation is a literal as well as a philosophical stance. Clark's relational objects were made to function by actually diminishing the space between them and the subject who encountered them, coming to "have meaning and structure only in the moment of direct bodily interaction with the spectator, now more accurately called participant" (Brett 61). These objects, consisting of a range of mostly everyday materials—including plastic, rubber, sand, and paper, among other things—are able, in the encounter with the participant, to act on her and her sensory apparatus. These factors are key to understanding the relational object, but not Clark's later work alone. The term echoes Gullar's theory of the non-object and has a much broader use, applicable to a great deal of the works made by those who aligned themselves with neoconcretism.

An expanded account of the relational object pertains to both plastic and poetic categories, though I will begin by considering how it describes some of Clark's earlier works before turning to Gullar's poetry. The idea that the relational object might eliminate the separation between subject and object sounds suspiciously impossible. However, many of the works made by those associated with neoconcretism do manage to invite the participant *into* the relational object. One example is Clark's well-known *Caminhando*. This piece begins as a strip of paper and becomes something else as the hands of the viewer-participant literally enter the material object, following instructions Clark lays out:

Faça você mesmo um "Caminhando" com a faixa de papel que envolve o livro, corte-a na largura, torça-a e cole-a de maneira a obter uma fita de Moebius. Tome então uma tesoura, enfie uma ponta na superfície e corte continuamente no sentido do comprimento. Tenha cuidado para não cair na parte já cortada—o que separaria a fita em dois pedaços. Quando você tiver dado a volta na fita de

Moebius, escolha entre cortar à direita e cortar à esquerda do corte já feito. Essa noção de escolha é decisiva e nela reside o único sentido dessa experiência. A obra é o seu ato. À medida em que se corta a fita, ela se afina e se desdobra em entrelaçamentos. No fim, o caminho é tão estreito que não pode mais ser aberto. É o fim do atalho. (Clark “Caminhando”)

If Clark’s hand is visible in this score, it is the participant’s hand that penetrates the object to create the work. This is one way in which the relational object emphasizes its materiality, despite the potential that having a score means, a work like *Caminhando* could be read as conceptual. The concept, though contributing to the execution of the participant’s intervention, exists outside both the object and the participant-subject, and that distance means that, unlike the penetrating participant and penetrated paper, the score partakes only tangentially in the phenomenological experience of the work. The meaning of the work lies not in the impetus laid out by the score, but in the experience the paper and scissors make possible—of cutting, of holding one’s wrist at an appropriate angle, of choosing along which path to continue cutting, and when to quit, etc. These experiences of the object do not just contribute to, but comprise, the meaning of the artwork. Its sense lies not in the sense-making work of the concept, but in the sensorial relations that are located between the participant and the relational object.

Whereas the object was characterized by Gullar as a “quasi-corpus,” the body of the participating subject undergoes an analogous transformation as it engages sensorially with a work like *Caminhando*. Cutting into the moebius strip, the participant’s body transforms into “one of the objects” that constitute the work (Merleau-Ponty 81). In this way, *Caminhando* helps to materially realize an aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that was appealing to the neoconcretists. As he describes it, “[I] treat my eyes as bits of matter. They then take their place

in the same objective space in which I am trying to situate the external object” (81). In *Caminhando*, more than the eyes join in this exchange. All the senses with which the participant engages the strip of paper partake of the same “objective space” of which the object does. In this way, both the object and the subject are bodies, or both are objects, or both are objects and bodies.

It is in this kind of relationality that Gullar’s understanding of artistic autonomy adheres. This definition is able to emerge thanks to neoconcretism’s understanding of the object as something mutually constituted with the subject in an exchange that prizes sensation over representation. As Gullar says about the non-object, what is created is “um ser de mundo cultural que, por nada representar, é sua própria representação e, portanto, apenas significação” (*Experiência neoconcreta* 58). In this way, the neoconcrete work emphasizes its independence from representation and further counters potential conceptualist readings. Though the relational object can be seen as a way of materially working out a set of phenomenological curiosities inspired by Merleau-Ponty, the object itself does not simply represent its idea.

Just like a moebius strip has no inside or outside, the neoconcrete resistance to representation marks another way in which the interiority of the work is bound to its material exteriority. The meaning to be found *in* the relational object is precisely that meaning that accumulates from the sensorial experience of its matter. Because the experience of the work is equal to its meaning, the meaning it represents is not just the fact of the object’s materiality, but the fact of those relations made to exist between the material object and the participant’s experience of it. The relational object can come to stand, then, for the convergence of subject and object that the group theorized after Merleau-Ponty not because it “represents” this idea, but because it opens up the space where this convergence becomes materially possible.

This is as true of neoconcretism's poetic objects as it is of the plastic. Gullar stresses this with regard to poetry, saying the work "is a direct phenomenological experience" and asking, "What does a poem mean? What is said there...if I could write it in another way, I wouldn't make a poem. That means the work moves beyond its condition as an object, creating for itself its own way of existing, and above all opening a field of meaning, in some way" (*Gullar in Conversation* 42). Though this claim may suggest that the object is a means to a meaning, it cannot be overlooked that that meaning is only possible by way of the particular material construction of the poem which is not, and cannot be, substituted for. The kinds of materials that make a neoconcrete poem may differ slightly from those that make a neoconcrete work of plastic art, but, regardless of the kind of material, what matters, and what means, for the neoconcrete work is the intersection of the object and the sensing subject.

To pause for a moment, I would like to, here, provide a summary of those characteristics of the neoconcrete object—poetic or plastic—before considering how these adhere in the poetic context and what their adherence there might have to contribute to a broader understanding of a relational poetics. First, neoconcretism rejects an understanding of the object-as-machine in favor of one where the object is considered, with the subject, to be a quasi-corpus. Second, the object and its materiality matter to neoconcretism. Third, in neoconcretism the object is *relational* and characterized not just by the relations of exteriority between its parts, but also by its openness toward the traversal of a participating subject's sense apparatus. Fourth, the neoconcrete object, despite—or because of—its relationality upholds the autonomy of art in that the meaning of the work is the work itself. It is not beholden to either the method by which the work was produced or to another object or idea it might be said to "represent." Furthermore, the

work includes both the object *and* its relations, but nothing more. Finally, as this essay stresses, neoconcretism's object belongs both to the history of art and the history of poetics.

Gullar's Relational Poetics

Carving out a more focused discussion of the *poetic* relational object is admittedly complicated by the fact that in neoconcretism, plastic art and poetry share so much in common. In addition, the indistinction of poetic and plastic categories is itself a defining feature of the movement. Neoconcrete poems are spatial, neoconcrete works of plastic art call themselves poems, and the difference between these generic markers comes, for the most part, to matter little. Still, our understanding of neoconcrete poetry's legacy can benefit from trying to think its version of relationality. For one thing, neoconcrete poetry significantly rewrites how poetry is made and what it is made from. Not just language, neoconcrete poetry can include such surprising materials as plastic, dirt, smells, and human bodies themselves. Interacting with these materials, and the material object that is the poem, also comes to constitute a reinscribed poetic subjectivity, one that is embodied, sensorial, and relationally entwined with the poem-object.

In recent years, other critics have taken up the question of the intersection of poetry and the object. Bill Brown, for example, writes of modernist poems that "begin with things and with the senses by which we apprehend them" ("Thing Theory" 2). His description, however, addresses a poem *about* things and *about* their sensing rather than a poem that constructs itself *as* the sensible object.¹⁰ As this essay has been arguing, neoconcrete poetry's contribution to the understanding of objects extends far beyond the descriptive or representational. Rather than being a poetry about objects, it is a poetry of objects, and the neoconcrete poetic object

contributes new dimensions not just to our understanding of this relationship, but also toward an understanding of subject-object relations as they adhered in neoconcretism.

Furthermore, it was poetry that gave rise to the neoconcrete exploration of relationality in the first place, specifically Gullar's livro-poemas and poemas espaciais, from which, according to him, "veio o estímulo que levou Lygia [Clark] e Hélio [Oiticica] a experiências futuras como os 'objetos relacionais'" (*Arte concreta e neoconcreta* 14). To turn toward the poetic, then, I would like to take a closer look at Gullar's career leading up to, and including, his neoconcrete works, and consider how, with each new material experiment, the relational poetic object developed. As I mentioned, in the years preceding the "Manifesto neoconcreto" Gullar was associated with concrete poetry and even exhibited his work alongside concrete poets and artists (including some of his neoconcrete colleagues) at the *Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta*. This exhibit brought together works of concrete art and poetry from both São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in 1956 and 57 and Gullar contributed some seven pages from his 1955 poem, *O Formigueiro*. The fifty-page poem, according to Gullar's introduction to its first published edition in 1991, is "nascido de uma palavra—*a formiga*" that, over the course of its reading, "se desintegra em seus elementos (letras) e se reintegra em nova forma" (unpaginated preface). The titular punning on "formiga" and "forma" in this statement represents one such dis- and re-integration of the work's basic elements and speaks to a broader concern of Gullar's early production—that of poetry's form.

Among the poet's earliest visually experimental works, *O Formigueiro* functions via the visual (and, were one to try and read the poem aloud, vocal) dis- and re-integration of the poem as the letters of "a formiga" disperse and recombine, like ants, before the reader in the space of the page. Gullar claims that *O Formigueiro* "sought, as well, to valorize th[e] interior silence of

the word, its semantic material, that which seemed to materialize in the blank space of the page” (*Gullar in Conversation* 35).

(Fig. 2 Ferreira Gullar *O Formigueiro* unpaginated)

At one and a half meters tall by fifty centimeters across, the original pages of the poem that were displayed at the *Exposição* would have exaggerated this effect, calling additional attention to the material support, and space, of the page. At such a scale, space is able to shed its status as mere support and enter fully into the poem’s perceptible materiality. This is something the published version of *O Formigueiro* accomplishes differently by being, in Gullar’s words, “a promessa do *livro-poema*, que [ele] realizaria em 1959” in which the book and the poem would become “uma unidade indissolúvel” and could no longer be apprehended separately (*O Formigueiro* unpaginated preface).

Many of these characteristics are true not just of Gullar’s work, but of all the concrete poetry displayed at the *Exposição*. Despite this, *O Formigueiro* should be seen as a site of rupture, because, as Gullar tells it, “na opinião do grupo paulista, *O Formigueiro* não era um poema concreto” (*O Formigueiro* unpaginated preface). Though he credits the break-up between the concretists and neoconcretists to the São Paulo-based poets who apparently rejected his contribution, in the same breath Gullar offers a critique of theirs, writing that *O Formigueiro* “dentro da concepção deles, efetivamente não era [concreto]: nem reduzia as palavras a mero elemento da mecânica fonético-visual, nem pretendia o tipo de comunicação imediata, instantânea, dos cartazes de propaganda, como prescrevia então a teoria dos paulistas” (*O Formigueiro* unpaginated preface). This critique is one version of Gullar’s fairly consistent characterization of the concrete poets after the rupture. That their method was problematically

mathematical or scientific is, as we have seen, another version. It is hard to be sure exactly how this falling-out took place, and if the concrete poets did, indeed, rebuff Gullar's contribution for not partaking of the kinds of "sectarianism" that he sees in their approach to poetry, it is clear that, whatever the precise historical circumstances, after the *Exposição*, Gullar's work and thinking would move in new directions.

During this period, Gullar began to produce relational works in which the poem's materiality more self-consciously engaged its participant—works under the categories of "livro-poema," "poema-objeto," and "poema espacial." Though only one explicitly says so, in each case, the poem becomes an object whose construction and consumption invite the reader-participant *in* as they create an experience that takes place in the relations between object and subject. For example, in the livro-poemas, to which *O Formigueiro* was a precursor, "the poem and the book are constructed at the same time" (*Gullar in Conversation* 71) via the reader's participation, which renders the poem indivisible from its status as a material object just as it allows the participant to traverse it sensorially. In addition to emphasizing the material elements of its construction, the livro-poemas also "materialize [a] sensation" (*Gullar in Conversation* 72). They are, in this way, the first example of a more realized relational poetics. To see how this works, we might take a look at "Livro-poema N° 3" (figure 3).

(Fig. 3 Diagram of "Livro-poema N° 3," Ferreira Gullar, *Experiência neoconcreta* 38)

Gullar describes this livro-poema as follows:

This livro-poema begins with blank space, and the first page, which is half the book diagonally, opens to uncover the word *flauta* [flute]. The next page, also on the diagonal, uncovered an entirely blank page and covers the earlier word *flauta*.

Another diagonal page opens and the word *prata* [silver] can be seen. Everything else continues entirely blank. Next the reader must open a diagonal page toward the left, and then another along a diagonal to the right, to reveal the word *fruta* [fruit]. That is, this book opens as if it were being peeled. I had wanted to materialize that sensation of opening fruit, through the use of an object. (*Gullar in Conversation* 71-72)

Though Gullar recognizes that he “wasn’t the first person to make a spatial work,” acknowledging that “the book is and was always that way” (*Gullar in Conversation* 76), his livro-poemas and poemas-objetos (for example “Noite”) ensure that the process of reading is no longer an activity so second nature as to be practically immaterial, but rather a deliberately relational, materially-experienced process. In this example, some remains of representation can be seen, in that the work’s unfolding is, if not necessarily representative of, at least analogous to, a fruit’s peeling. That said, what distinguishes this potential link to an external object from being purely representational, is that, in the livro-poema, language does not represent by way of sensual description. Rather, it is the object that materially reminds of a similar sense experience.

By the time Gullar makes “Poema enterrado” in 1959 this remnant of representation would be less present and sense experience further forefronted. In this work the reader “participaria com todo o corpo, entrando no poema” (Gullar, *Experiência neoconcreta* 60).

(Fig. 4 Diagram of “Poema enterrado,” Ferreira Gullar, *Experiência neoconcreta* 62)

This poem, a drawing of which you can see in figure 4, was constructed in the garden of Hélio Oiticica’s family home. It was

a poem that could be a 3m x 3m room...buried under the earth. Readers would access this room via a set of stairs, would open the door of the poem, and would enter into it. In the anteroom preceding the poem itself, the reader-visitor would find the instructions of what to do in order to activate the poem. Once inside the poem, reader-visitors would find a 50cm x 50cm red cube; once lifted, it would reveal a 30cm x 30cm green cube. Once the green cube was lifted, they would find a smaller, white cube that was 10cm x 10cm, and on the face of the cube that was touching the floor, the word *Rejuvenesça* [Rejuvenate]. (*Gullar in Conversation* 83-84).

Here, as opposed to the livro-poemas, Gullar's poetry would manage not just to make material the process of reading, but to create an entirely new "reading" experience, made possible by the spatial and material construction of this room/poem and existing in the relational space inside of it. To a greater degree, even, than a work like *Caminhando*, this work is "um corpo *transparente* ao conhecimento fenomenológico" (Gullar, "Teoria do não-objeto" 1). It is fully penetrable and, as such, creates a relation of total sense immersion in which the participating subject, literally inside the poem, is both a sensing body and one poetic object among others that, together, constitute the work.

Though this work shares many characteristics with installation art, and though it was a collaboration with neoconcrete plastic artist Oiticica, the "Poema enterrado" is a poem in which the most traditional of poetic materials—language—contributes to the kind of relationality produced. In *Caminhando* language existed outside the relational object as a score which prompted the participant's intervention. In the "Poema enterrado," language is present in the work's most internal space, buried not only in the ground but also under a series of nested boxes, themselves contained by a room scented with jasmine. As Mariola V. Alvarez argues, Gullar's

choice of the imperative “rejuvenesça” also asks “the spectator to do something—to perform the word. The word “rejuvenesça” functions as a sign, and yet exactly how the reader *experienced* rejuvenation was left undetermined” (Alvarez). In this way, even language forms part of the material impetus toward sensory experience helping to incite the action of the sensing subject. In turn, the sensing subject also contributes to the material construction of the object that is the poem.

Caminhando’s use of language also incites the participating subject to cut the paper, but in the “Poema enterrado” the word is not external to the object. Rather, it is a most intimate constitutive material of the work. It is not representational in any clearly defined way, but it does call for a rejuvenation of our understanding of how poetic language matters. By emerging *from* the participant’s sensorial engagement with nested boxes contained in the poem, it suggests that language does not just function as a way of approaching objects. Rather only by engaging bodily with objects, in their materiality, can language be uncoverable. While language might be, phenomenologically speaking, left over in a work like *Caminhando*, in the “Poema enterrado,” even language “se rende à percepção sem deixar resto” (Gullar, “Teoria do não-objeto” 1).

This is a work with many consequences for how we think about the role of poetry within the broader neoconcrete project. Underlying these consequences is a single, profound assumption: that this is poetry at all. This is an assumption I have made throughout this essay, and one I want to insist on as I conclude, though these neoconcrete works of poetry do have much in common with works of plastic art. Even Gullar recognizes this, when he asks himself, after the installation of the “Poema enterrado”: “não estaria me transformando num artista plástico em vez de escritor?” (*Experiência neoconcreta* 61). Other than language, Gullar’s exemplary relational poems lack almost every criterion that might apply, for example, to the

more lyrically-inclined poetry Gullar began to write immediately following neoconcretism. I have chosen not to apply the standard reflected there—of poetry written with significantly more words, in line, on the page, and in the book—to neoconcrete poetry. Rather, I have begun from the assumption that Gullar’s neoconcrete works are poetry in order to explore the productive results of such an assumption in light of the movement’s better known standing within the plastic arts.

Emphasizing the poetic contributions to neoconcretism creates opportunities for readers and scholars of poetry today, especially in the context of Anglo-America where, even more than in Brazil, the lyric has overwhelmingly equated itself with poetry. Increasing the profile of neoconcrete poetry within this context allows for a significantly expanded definition of the category. If a reader is standing, for example, inside the “Poema enterrado” as a poem, so much can come into view that might otherwise be disregarded as mere support. Boxes are part of the poem. Stairs are part of the poem. The smells of jasmine and earth are part of the poem. The reader himself is part of the poem.

If the “Poema enterrado” is read as a work of plastic art that prizes the conceptual over the material, these material components might remain imperceptible. Alternately, they may be considered not to constitute the artwork, but to function as mere means of its conveyance. As a poem, a work like the “Poema enterrado” not only engages the participant’s sense experience, but also trains those same senses to be able to sense the poem *as* material. Taking the “Poema enterrado” to be poetry thus helps to construct poetic subjectivity as something rooted in a sensorial encounter with the relational poetic object, rather than something that writes the poem without also constituting it. This is how the relational poetic object’s most radical rejuvenation begins.

Notes

1. While the term “visual art” would generally be preferable in English to “plastic art,” in this case I, like many scholars of neoconcretism, have chosen to use “plastic” here in deference to the fact that a primary feature of neoconcretism was its interest in engaging more than the visual senses.

2. This refers to both concrete poetry and concrete art, movements that preceded and contributed to the launch of neoconcretism in Brazil. Concrete art prioritized simple geometric shapes in painting and sculpture (among other media) and concrete poetry sought, at times, an algorithmic or mathematical mode of generating poems.

3. The term “relational aesthetics” can be traced to Nicolas Bourriaud’s definition of “art that takes as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and *private* symbolic space” (quoted in Bishop 160). Many of the practices discussed here share these concerns, not to mention terminology. However, neoconcrete relationality has specifically to do with subject-object relations, and though the movement certainly engaged with what Bourriaud refers to as the “sphere of human interactions” this engagement does not come at the expense of an object-centered art practice.

4. Mário Pedrosa, a critic who substantially contributed to the formation of neoconcretism, is among those early commentators on the differences between the São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro-based concretists. Flávio Moura describes how “Pedrosa segue com o argumento de que os jovens concretistas de São Paulo carregam a preocupação constante de teorizar sobre” while “os cariocas, ao contrário, manteriam uma relação com a produção artística muito menos mediada pela teoria” (Moura 153-54). This might seem surprising in light of the theories that emerged, strongly, from the neoconcrete movement as it developed. However, it also points to

the ways in which neoconcrete theory was deeply grounded in the group's material practice.

5. Lygia Clark's early work, including painting and sculpture, was associated with the concrete art movement, though she later joined with the neoconcretists and began to move away from the stricter constructivist approach of the prior movement. Her theories of the object will be further addressed in this article.

6. This preface was reprinted in the March 23, 1959 Sunday Supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil* alongside the "Manifesto neoconcreto."

7. Lygia Pape, for example, called her *Língua apunhalada*—a 1968 photograph depicting a bleeding, outstretched tongue—a "poema visual" provoking reflections on the association between speech and silence during the tightening of the military dictatorship. Similarly, Hélio Oiticica's *Bólides* series includes several "caixa poemas" that contain poetic inscriptions. For example, *B30 Bólido-caixa 17 variação do B1, caixa-poema* consists of a small box that the viewer-participant can open to remove and handle a plastic sack filled with raw, powdered pigment. Written on the plastic that contains the pigment and attaches it to the box are the words "Do meu sangue, do meu suor, este amor viverá."

8. Gullar notes that *Phenomenology of Perception*, *The Structure of Behavior*, and *Eye and Mind* were among his most influential texts. (*Gullar in conversation* 43)

9. In this language, it's possible to see Gullar working closely with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that "the completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden" (79).

10. In a more recent article, Brown discusses L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry as "insisting on the materiality of language—the thing-character of language—by retarding or congesting or displacing language (what we understand as the communicative function of language) with work

made from fragments, syllables, letters, &c” (“[Concept/Object] [Text/Event]” 524). This insistence on the materiality of the text shares many affinities with the aims of concretism and neoconcretism in Brazil. For example, both were concerned with disrupting what Brown describes as “the communicative function of language,” though the Brazilian movements (starting more than ten years before the North American movement referenced) also sought other avenues for materializing language, including the use of non-linguistic materials.

Works Cited

- Alvarez, Mariola V. "The Anti-Dictionary: Ferreira Gullar's Non-Object Poems." *Nonsite.org*, vol. April, no. 9, 2013, <http://nonsite.org/feature/the-anti-dictionary-ferreira-gullars-non-object-poems>.
- Bishop, Claire. *Participation (Documents of Contemporary Art)*. M.I.T. Press, 2006.
- Brett, Guy. "Lygia Clark: In Search of the Body." *Art in America*, vol. 82, no. July, 1994, pp. 56–108.
- Brown, Bill. "[Concept/Object] [Text/Event]." *ELH*, vol. 81, no. 2, 2014, pp. 521–552.
- . "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1–22.
- de Campos, Augusto, et al. "plano-pilôto para poesia concreta." *Teoria da poesia concreta: Textos críticos e manifestos 1950-1960*, edited by Augusto de Campos et al., Edições Invenção, 1965, pp. 154–156.
- Castro, Amílcar de, et al. "Manifesto neoconcreto." *Jornal do Brasil, Suplemento Dominical*, 23 Mar. 1959, pp. 4–5.
- Clark, Lygia. "Lygia Clark." www.lygiaclark.org.br, <http://www.lygiaclark.org.br/biografia/ING.asp>. Accessed 20 Sept. 2013.
- Gullar, Ferreira. *Arte concreta e neoconcreta, da construção a desconstrução : Concrete Art and Neo-Concrete Art, From Construction to Deconstruction*. Dan Galeria, 2006.
- . *Experiência neoconcreta: Momento limite da arte*. Cosac Naify, 2007.
- . *Ferreira Gullar in Conversation with = En conversación con Ariel Jiménez*. Fundación Cisneros, 2012.

- . “Não custa nada imaginar que uma nova arte está para nascer.” *Folha de São Paulo*, 11 Dec. 2016.
- . *O Formigueiro*. Edição Europa, 1991.
- . “Teoria do não-objeto.” *Jornal Do Brasil, Suplemento Dominical*, 19 Dec. 1959, p. 1.
- LeWitt, Sol. “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art.” *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, M.I.T. Press, 1999.
- Martins, Sérgio Bruno. “Phenomenological Openness Historicist Closure : Revisiting the Theory of the Non-Object.” *Third Text*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2012, pp. 79–90.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith, Routledge, 2005.
- Moura, Flávio. “Mário Pedrosa e o neoconcretismo: A centralidade de um projeto crítico.” *Novos Estudos*, vol. 99, no. Julho, 2014, pp. 137–157.
- Perrone, Charles A. *Seven Faces: Brazilian Poetry Since Modernism*. Duke University Press, 1996.
- Price, Rachel. *The Object of the Atlantic: Concrete Aesthetics in Cuba, Brazil, and Spain, 1868-1968*. Northwestern University Press, 2014.
- Ramírez, Mari Carmen. “Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980.” *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, edited by Luis Camnitzer et al., Queens Museum of Art, 1999, pp. 53–71.
- Rodrigues Da Silva, Renato. “Ferreira Gullar’s Non-Object, or How Neoconcrete Poetry Became One with the World.” *Word & Image*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2013, pp. 257–272,

Spanúdis, Theon. "Poesia neoconcreta." *Jornal Do Brasil, Suplemento Dominical*, 23 Mar. 1959,
p. 1.